

GLIMPSE INTO ROMAN CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL EFFORTS IN ABAKALIKI, 1922—1982

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Introduction

Roman Catholicism entered Southeastern Nigeria a full 22 years from its establishment in the Southwest. In late 1885, Father Joseph Lutz of the Holy Ghost Fathers Congregation led Father Horne and Brothers Hermas and Jean-Gotto into establishing the Catholic Faith on the Southeastern part of Nigeria. They got to Onitsha on the Niger Coast on 5 December, 1885. Upon arrival, the French Spiritan missionaries proceeded to the palace of the Obi of Onitsha, Obi Anazonwu to discuss the object of their arrival and to seek permission and cooperation of Royalty to carry out their mission. Among other things, Father Lutz had told the Obi and his chiefs that they had “come to live near you, to open a school, to teach your children and your good people, all who may wish to come and learn knowledge from the white men of Europe.”¹ With this, the early Catholic missionaries went on to establish in Onitsha the first Catholic school in

Igbo land which had a total of forty pupils comprising of freed men and slaves, adults and children.

Thus, from the earliest beginnings of the Catholic presence in Igbo land, the setting up of schools for the education of the people was central to their mission. All through their missionary activities in the area, the Roman Catholic missionaries have made the establishment of schools their signature tune and the principal strategy for evangelization. In Igbo land the success and impact of the Catholic Schools in both the dissemination of western education to the people and their conversion to Catholicism have been widely acknowledged. This has led to Igbo land being reckoned as the bastion of Roman Catholicism in Nigeria and the most successful story of Catholic missionary effort in Africa. It is also such that in the discussion of the education of the Igbo people, the story will not be complete without the acknowledgement of the contribution of the Catholic Mission. As D. B. Abernethy said, “All the Mission groups in Southern Nigeria were interested in educating the common people, but none served this cause more energetically than the Roman Catholics of the Eastern Region.”²

This paper is a glimpse into the activities of the Catholic Mission in the educational wellbeing of the Abakaliki people. The study sourced its data from both primary and

secondary sources and adopts the narrative method of historical writing.

Early Catholic Activities in Abakaliki

The first ever contact made by the Catholic Mission with Abakaliki was in the year 1922 when Father J. Howell commenced his missionary journeys to the Abakaliki prisons to administer the sacrament of baptism on condemned criminals.³ His early visits were irregular but later increased in frequency, prompting a few African staff of the prison to find a small place where prayers would be conducted for them by the Father during his weekly visits. Some of the initiating staff included the prison clerk Mr. Olofi, the District Interpreter Mr. Kojo, and Mr. Efiiong, the Dispenser⁴, all of whom were non-Abakaliki indigenes. Still in July, 1922, Rev. Father Groez opened three infant schools in rural Abakaliki villages- one was in Iboko Izzi; another in Amagu Ezza and then in Igbudu Ikwo. The schools were temporarily closed in 1923 by Mr Shelton, the District Officer who frowned that collections were being taken from the locals to pay the teachers.⁵ In one of the visits to the Abakaliki prisons, Father J. Mellet who was living with the old Father Howell was the one who came. When he came, Father Mellet made a request to an Abakaliki ruler, chief Okuta for a place to build a school and a church but was bluntly refused by the native potentate

who did not want to do anything with the Whiteman's ways.⁶

Following this, a group of soldiers living in the Abakaliki barracks, worried that there was no regular church to mould the morals of their dependants, decided to hire a teacher to teach catechism to their wives and children. Those soldiers included Corporals Banyong, Babili and a handful of their other interested colleagues.⁷

From 1923, Catholic missionaries from Eke parish in the Enugu area began to make their own concerted efforts to establish the Catholic faith in Abakaliki. Eke was the cradle of Enugu Catholicism having been established since 1915 on the invitation of Chief Onyeama of Eke who is reputed to have preferred the Roman Catholic Mission to the Church Missionary Society who had earlier established at Udi nearby. It has been suggested that the humanitarian and developmental credentials of the Roman Catholic Church rather than genuine love of the church was what prompted Chief Onyeama to invite the Roman Catholic missionaries to his area instead of the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society.⁸ Of the importance of Eke to Enugu Catholicism, Father J. Okoye had thus submitted: "It was indeed at Eke that the religious tree which spread its branches to other parts of Enugu Diocese was planted, watered and nurtured"⁹. Thus, relishing their success and acceptance in the

Enugu area as exemplified by Chief Owushi Onyeama of Eke, the Roman Catholic missionaries at Eke were emboldened to explore the Abakaliki territories. From 1923 Reverend Father Davey of the Eke Parish set himself to the task of driving himself 100 kms on motorcycle to Abakaliki every Sunday to celebrate his third mass of the day.¹⁰ He started out encouraging the few persons in Abakaliki who were committed in attending catechism on weekdays and general prayers on Sundays.

In 1926, Father Vincent Davey sent a teacher who opened a school at the old KpiriKpiri area.¹¹ The school was almost exclusively attended by the children of strangers to the town, mostly civil servants- soldiers, clerks, policemen, and warders. It had only three Abakaliki boys on its register, all of whom from Izzi. The population of pupils in the school fluctuated as workers on transfer pulled their wards/children along. Notwithstanding, by the first half of the 1930s, the number on roll had reached 114 children, with about 30 of them being Abakaliki indigenes. By this time the school had a total of three teachers and Father Davey still constantly visiting.

The St. Patrick's Missionary Society

An event that occurred in 1932 gave a boost to Catholic missionary activities in Abakaliki. That year the papacy gave approval for the founding of a new missionary body – the St. Patrick’s Missionary Society otherwise known as the Kiltegan Fathers which was founded by Father P.J Whitney.¹² It was a society of Irish priests and the principal missionary group that evangelized Abakaliki. Until the founding of this missionary society, the whole area comprising the present Catholic Dioceses of Calabar, Ogoja, Abakaliki were still under the direct supervision and administration of the Holy Ghost Bishop of Onitsha.¹³ Such large responsibility engendered paucity of priests and the vast territory was not adequately evangelized or taken care of. At the time, there were only two resident priests at Ogoja who looked after the schools and churches in Ikom, Obubra, Afikpo, Ogoja, Obudu and Abakaliki Divisions.¹⁴ However the birth of the St. Patrick’s Missionary Society of Ireland changed everything and caused the concentration of missionaries in those areas.

Events leading to the formation of the St Patrick’s Missionary Society had its origins in the 1920’s in Southeastern Nigeria. Bishop Joseph Shanahan, a member of the Holy Ghost Order was running the Southeastern Nigerian Catholic Diocese of 8 million people from Onitsha and had only 23 priests to assist him. He then decided to appeal to students about to be

ordained in Maynooth, the National Seminary in Ireland, to give the first five years of their priesthoods to Nigeria.¹⁵ At the time, it was normal for newly ordained priests in Ireland to go to America or England for a few years, but none had until then gone to Africa. The first student to volunteer for the Southeastern Nigerian mission was Fr P. J Whitney of the Diocese of Ardagh.¹⁶ He accompanied Bishop Shanahan to Nigeria in 1920 after his ordination in June of that year. Another priest from Dublin, Fr Thomas Ronayne, ordained seven years earlier in Maynooth, also volunteered and travelled together with them.¹⁷ By the end of the 1920's, ten more Irish diocesan priests had joined them and worked together with the Holy Ghost Fathers Congregation in Southeastern Nigeria.¹⁸ As the years went by, the diocesan priests came to believe that what the Nigerian Mission needed was permanent commitment. They then decided to set up a society of priests who would be full-time missionaries. Fr P.J Whitney was chosen to lead the Society. In March 1930, St. Patrick's Missionary Society was set up on a trial basis with Fr. P.J Whitney as Superior. Its headquarters was established at Kiltegan Co. Wicklow, Ireland where John Hughes, a tea merchant had donated an old house and 20 acres of land for that purpose.¹⁹ From the city's name came the other name of the Society- "the Kiltegan Fathers". Kiltegan became a place in which the diocesan priests working in Nigeria could spend their holidays and also a base from

where the upcoming Society could be organized. Fr. P.J Whitney appealed in Maynooth, as Bishop Shanahan had done and seven more priests again volunteered and went to Nigeria by the end of the 1930s. He also travelled throughout Ireland speaking of the needs of Southeastern Nigeria and seeking the support he required to establish the Society as a permanent missionary body within the Catholic Church.²⁰ The success he recorded was such that by 1932, the time was set for the formal canonization of the Society whose motto is- *Christ's Love Compels Us*.²¹

The first three members of the St. Patrick's Society were Fr. P.J Whitney, the Superior General, Fr. Patrick Francis Whitney, his cousin and Fr. Francis Hickey.²² They took the oath of membership on St. Patrick's Day, 1932, the day that Ireland celebrated the 1,500th Anniversary of the coming of St. Patrick to Ireland. The primary concern of the Society was evangelization to those who had not heard of Christ before. They were also committed in the work of education and health services.²³

In 1934, the area comprising Calabar, Uyo, Ikot-Ekpene, Ogoja, Abakaliki and Afikpo was carved from the territory once administered by the Holy Ghost Fathers and given to the Kiltegan Fathers.²⁴ The territory was now named the Prefecture of Calabar and Monsignor

James Moynagh was made the first Apostolic Prefect. With this, Abakaliki and the other areas under the new prefecture received renewed interest and attention.²⁵ The dedication of the Kiltegan Fathers to the evangelization of this area was important given its special status in the missionary calculation of the Roman Catholic Mission. Unlike other dioceses in the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province, the Calabar-Ogoja-Abakaliki area held immense attraction to the Catholic Mission being that it had not witnessed the evangelical activities of non-Catholic missionaries as much as the other towns or areas in the ecclesiastical province²⁶

Unlike what it was in the Onitsha parent field where the Roman Catholic Mission was preceded by the Church of England Mission and some other protestant missions, the Catholic Church preceded the Protestant churches in this area.²⁷ Itigidi, Obubra, Ikom and some parts of Abakaliki saw the presence of the Presbyterian and Lutheran churches before the arrival of the Roman Catholic church but the presence of those non-Catholic missions had not been entrenched before the Roman Catholic Mission made her entry into those areas in grand style.²⁸ It was therefore important that concentrated attention be paid to that area in order to harvest the rich missionary dividends that awaited. The 1932 founding of the St. Patrick's Missionary Society of Ireland and its dedication to the evangelization of the area caused the

sending of priests and teachers to areas not reached before. In 1934, a qualified teacher was posted to Abakaliki causing the number of pupils and church membership in the area to increase. Classes also reached Standard IV and in 1937 the Mission school became government assisted.²⁹ In 1938, a semi-permanent structure measuring 100ft by 24ft was erected. A Father's Rest House was also built in 1936.

In 1938, the areas comprising Ogoja, Obudu, Obubra, Abakaliki and Afikpo was separated from Calabar and named as Ogoja Prefecture and later Diocese with Monsignor P.J Whitney as Prefect Apostolic. Two years later, in 1940 when he resigned the appointment on grounds of health, Monsignor Thomas McGettrick took over the administration of the Diocese.³⁰ These changes further enhanced the growth and spread of schools and churches, bringing them more and more into the ambit of proper supervision. Many more schools were opened at various stations including Abakaliki and this also presented new staffing shortages, a challenge which Monsignor McGettrick had to solve by recruiting teachers from the Anua parish in the Calabar Diocese from where he took up appointment as Prefect Apostolic. Abakaliki was given more teachers.³¹

The Setting up of Catholic Schools in Abakaliki

In the Abakaliki area as elsewhere, great emphasis was placed on the setting up of schools to instruct the people in both western and religious education. Following the principles adopted by the pioneer Catholic missionaries in Igbo land especially Bishop Joseph Shanahan,³² many schools were established in the Abakaliki mission field. Accordingly by 1960, there were 178 Catholic primary schools in the area and seven years later, the number had increased to 249 with a population of 38,820 boys and 12,120 girls.³³ Schools were also opened for the purposes of training people for the priesthood, men and women. Irrespective of the difficult terrain of the area, the missionaries still carried out their missions.

The Abakaliki area even up to now has been particularly unfortunate in terms of accessibility. It is in the words of Thomas McGettrick still a “traceless prairie”³⁴ due to lack of road networks. In colonial times, Abakaliki was an impenetrable bush “... crossed by unforded rivers and characterized by heavy, clayey soils which restricted wet season travel”³⁵. In a memorandum sent to General Babangida, President of Nigeria in 1987 by members of the Movement for the creation of Ebonyi State, they alluded to that when they reported inter alia about the place:

With an area of 5,935 sq kilometers it has less than 250 kilometres of tarred federal and state roads. In fact, one of its component Local

Government Areas, Ikwo LGA is the only LGA in the former East-Central State, and probably the only one in the former Eastern Region which today does not have and has never had even one metre of tarred road in the long history of Nigeria even though impassable gullies designated Federal and State roads traverse it.³⁶

If that was the state of the road networks in the Abakaliki area in 1987, it could be better left to imagination what it was in the early to mid 20th century when the Catholic and other missionary bodies commenced missionary activities in the area. This was more so as the Abakaliki Province (present Ebonyi State) was part of the Old Ogoja Province which was known as the “lost province” and the “pioneer fringe” in colonial times³⁷, names it acquired for its neglect, inaccessibility and dearth of infrastructural developments. Yet, irrespective of the impassability and impenetrability of the area, the Catholic missionaries penetrated the hinterlands and opened schools to teach the people.³⁸ Although they were Europeans who left behind in the home countries well developed social amenities, they still accommodated themselves within the Abakaliki bushes in order to open up the people to the gains of western education and Christianity. Up till today in the area, there are places which have not seen any other improvement in infrastructural developments beyond what the

missionaries did. Community Primary School, Okaleru Umuezeokoha, (formerly St. Benedict's Catholic School) for example, has not received any government improvement of its structures beyond what the Roman Catholic missionaries did since 1958 when the school was founded! Also since the bridge the Catholic missionaries built in the area collapsed, no government has found it appropriate to replace it. Right now pupils do not go to school any day it rained to avoid being swept away.³⁹

The mission of the Roman Catholic Church to educate the people of Abakaliki began when Fr. Vincent Davey established a school at Mile 50 in 1922. The school was later relocated in 1950 to the place it presently situates at St. Teresa's Cathedral, Ndiegu-Abakpa, Abakaliki.⁴⁰ Opened as a standard IV school, it attracted people from all over Southern Nigeria especially from other Igbo land areas who took up employment there as teachers.⁴¹ Immediately following were the schools opened by Rev. Fr. Eugene Groetze at Iboko in Izzi; Amuzu in Ezza South area; and Igbudu, Ikwo.⁴² Father McManus and Father Joe Kelly followed on and established schools at Ezillo, Achiegu, and Effium in the 1940s.⁴³ In 1960 there were no less than 178 Catholic primary schools in Abakaliki and in 1967 had grown to 247 with a pupil-population of about 38,820 boys and 12,120 girls.⁴⁴ From the late 1950s the Church began to pay attention to the opening of post- primary schools in the area.⁴⁵ They

began to establish secondary schools and Teacher Training Colleges to receive and further educate primary school grandaunts and to cater for the explosive number of adherents being recorded in the primary schools. The need to establish Teacher Training Colleges became more important when it became the policy of Government that only mission schools with trained teachers would be qualified to be given Government grants and assistance.⁴⁶ In 1956, the St. Joseph's Teachers' Training College, Igbeagu, Izzi was established.⁴⁷ This was followed in 1961 with the opening of the Saint John Bosco Boys Secondary School, Izhia; Saint Aidan's Boys Secondary School, Nwachi, Umuezeoka - Ezza; Saint Enda's Boys Secondary School, Iboko-Izzi; Holy Child Girls Secondary School, Sharon- Izzi. The first three secondary schools were for boys while the fourth was built for the education of girls.⁴⁸ Mary Knoll College, Ogoja also served in the education of the people of Abakaliki. Under the bishopric of Thomas McGettrick at Ogoja, the Abakaliki area also saw the establishment of schools for the training of Reverend Fathers and Sisters. To this effect, Saint Augustine's Junior Seminary, Ezzamgbo was established in 1958 to cater for boys and the Annunciation Girls' Secondary School, Ezillo opened in 1962 for the molding of girls interested in religious life.⁴⁹ In 1967, there were 247 Catholic primary schools in Abakaliki.⁵⁰

Effect of the Nigeria-- Biafra War

Unfortunately, the educational humanitarianism of the Catholic Mission would soon suffer a setback as a result of political developments in the country which climaxed in the 1967 outbreak of the Nigeria--Biafra War.

The country broke into two, pitting the North and West of Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba against the East mostly inhabited by the Igbo. The three years of hostilities that followed, saw immense destruction of human and material resources, especially in the Igbo territories where the war was mostly staged. In Biafra land, people suffered blockade, starvation and genocide orchestrated by the central government who even saw starvation as a legitimate weapon of war.⁵¹ The Roman Catholic missionaries who were mostly Irish expatriates saw the devastation of the Biafrans as unjust and swung into humanitarian actions aimed at alleviating their suffering.⁵² They organized reliefs and other palliative measures for the people. This humanitarian act of the Roman Catholic Church and missionaries would later see the government punishing them by snatching their schools from them and repatriating the majority of them from the country. The war ended on 10, January 1970, with the Igbo territories capitulating to the federal side. For the Roman Catholic Church in Igbo land, it was time to be penalized for helping the Igbo pull through life during the war.⁵³

The victorious military government of General Gowon appointed Mr. Ukpabi Asika as the administrator of the East Central State.⁵⁴ Asika had been with the central government during the war and was rewarded by that appointment. He did not hide the central government's resentment for the Christian missionaries for their decided stand with the Igbo during the war and promptly punished them. In a government Edict and White Paper titled "Public Education Edict: East Central State of Nigeria Gazette Number 3, Enugu, May 1970", he announced Government takeover of all mission and voluntary agency schools.⁵⁵ This removed the church from its ownership and management of its mission schools. As Obiora Ike said,

This meant that a very important vehicle and tool for evangelization through the schools had been removed from the Church in Igbo land. It was followed by the expulsion of all the missionaries from Europe as a punishment to the Church and the Igbo for the Biafra war. It was said that the missionaries had supported their faithful and given food and medication to the suffering people of Biafra. In blunt terms, the education authorities and government declared that evangelization or to use their very exact term "indoctrination" should not be carried out through the school.⁵⁶

Bishop Thomas McGettrick of Ogoja (and Abakaliki Diocese), lamented as follows:

The civil war which lasted for thirty months brought its own share of sorrows; one of the greatest was the publication of Edict 1 of 1971 by which the Military Government of the East confiscated all our schools—primary, secondary, and teacher training. The buildings were also confiscated.... Just by the stroke of a pen without consulting anybody, the Government took full possession of all our schools. The East Central State was the first to take over schools completely. The total number taken over was 5,896 and out of that number, 2,996 belonged to the Catholic Church and in Abakaliki Diocese 249 of that number were Catholic schools; also five secondary schools and two training colleges were taken over by Government; that number does not include the schools and colleges in the Ogoja Diocese.⁵⁷

Bishop McGettrick further lamented,

Many of the teachers that the Mission fired for immoral behavior were re-instated. It was really a diabolical act... The Christian doctrine was only taught for one hour one day per week and was taught at the same time in each school, so

the priest could only visit one school each week. It often happened that when the priest went there, he was told that the children were engaged in sports preparation. Alternatively, he was told they were making a farm or building latrines or otherwise engaged in some other occupation. The priest had to come away without giving moral instructions. It worked out that the children passed through the school without being baptized. It made the children indifferent to religion...In a few years, the tragedy will manifest itself in this country, when the most intelligent of these children will become leaders of thought and occupy high positions in the country. The country may relapse to paganism or they may adopt communism or some non-Christian ideology.⁵⁸

In the face of this ugly development however, the Roman Catholic Church did not give up. They did not just throw their hands into the air and relapse into self bemoaning. In the years since they lost their schools, the Church has struggled to regain ownership of those schools and at the same time embarking on the establishment of fresh mission schools.⁵⁹ In Abakaliki Diocese, this second phase of Catholic education has been mostly carried out under the direction of Bishop Michael Nnachi Okoro who took over from Bishop

Thomas McGettrick as the first indigenous Bishop of Abakaliki.⁶⁰ Determined to continue the educational transformation of the Catholic Church in the area, he established the St. Theresa's Nursery and Primary School in 1982 being his answer to the request of the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) for a Catholic school where their children would receive quality and balanced educational attention. In that same year, the Bishop also granted the request of Rev. Father Alphonsus Iwueke and allowed him to establish the Madonna Secondary School and Vocational Centre at Umuhuali in Ishielu Local Government Area.⁶¹ The school attracted immediate patronage as many parents and guardians within Abakaliki and environs saw it as a choice centre for the education and formation of their wards and children. Other priests and laity have since followed suit and have had many Catholic schools established and being established throughout the Abakaliki area.⁶²

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Mission which introduced itself in Southeastern Nigeria with the opening of schools continued in the same light in Abakaliki. To this end, the church founded many primary and post-primary schools, including teacher training colleges and seminaries to educate and train the people of the area. The Church accommodated both boys and girls in their educational

efforts and thus simultaneously established boys secondary schools and girls' secondary schools; boys' seminary schools and girls' seminary schools. Although the Church lost its schools at the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war when the government announced takeover of all mission and voluntary agency schools in Eastern Nigeria, the Roman Catholic Church in Abakaliki did not allow that to deter them for long. Thus, in 1982, the Church under Bishop Michael Nnachi Okoro (the first indigenous bishop of Abakaliki Catholic Diocese) began another round of schools establishment in the post-war years to enable the Church continue in its contributions to the educational needs of the people.

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